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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a community's educational improvement project in Tennessee that resulted from executive appointment of a citizen task force in each community. The paper reports project development and results; discussion emphasizes implications for school administrators. A joint task force, appointed in 1985, was directed to develop measurable goals that the community will expect the school system to attain and to develop a way to inform the community about schools' attainment of those goals. Area university researchers conducted a telephone survey of community attitudes, drawing a stratified random sample of 2 percent of 18,000 households. Questions administered to 257 interviewees concerned educational quality, teachers' salaries, and budgets. Opinions generally were supportive of strong educational programs. Task force members visited schools and administered a questionnaire to teachers. A "report card" graded cities on educational categories. The task force recommended greater ongoing public involvement with schools in receiving information, in participation, and in decisionmaking. The paper explores implications of the recommendations for administrators. Conclusions are that use of community resources is critical and that polling can determine community concerns before plans are established, thereby resulting in a valid community school concept. Modern methods can enable administrators to restore communication with the community. (CJH)

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ASSESSING CITIZEN ATTITUDES TOWARD LOCAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

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ASSESSING CITIZEN ATTITUDES TOWARD LOCAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Introduction

Reform is once again the buzzword for education. For the 1980's the reform movement has emerged from the political sphere. Although fueled at the federal level, the driving force behind the changes affecting the nation's schools has come from the states' governors and legislators. Local school systems, once powerful and often autonomous, have become reactive to state directed programs involving the curriculum, teacher performance, and administrative accountability. One effect of this assumption of state control has been to make education a public issue ranking along with the perennial debates on the economy and social concerns.

In Tennessee, education has served as an effective issue for Governor Lamar Alexander's administration. As part of the Comprehensive Education Reform Act of 1984, he initiated a popular concept to further enhance his Better Schools Program. Citizen Task Forces were appointed in each community throughout the State to grade their local schools and provide guidance for improvement.

This paper will focus on one community's project which resulted from the Citizen Task Force program. An outline of the project's development will be provided and the results reported. However, emphasis will be placed upon the implications of this project for local school administrators.

The thesis to be addressed is that sensitivity to the attitudes of the public toward education and the involvement of the total community in the functioning of the schools can be the bases for a successful educational system.

The Citizen Task Force

Following a directive from the State, a city commission and a county commission of a community in Upper East Tennessee appointed local citizens to a joint Task Force in the Spring of 1985. Their charge was again directed from the State level: (1) develop measurable goals which the community will expect the school system to reach; and (2) develop a way to help the community keep track of how well the schools are reaching those goals from one year to the next.

The local Task Force decided that it was crucial to have an understanding of the attitudes of the community toward the schools before attempting to make significant changes in an effort to improve them. It was decided that a survey of parents and teachers was a necessary first step. Although a national Gallup Poll on education was annually conducted, little had been done at the local level to determine the immediate concerns of the community members and educators.

Recognizing the technical nature of scientific surveys, the Task Force sought the expertise of area university professors in the College of Education's Department of Supervision and Administration. The survey project was outlined and funds were secured from the State for its operation.

Public Opinion Polling

To begin the study, the University Research Team determined the distribution of the population in the twenty-three different political subdivisions of the county. They concluded that the most valid way of identifying persons to be involved in the survey was through those using electric power since essentially all households had electricity. With the assistance of the electric company,

which provided the names of heads of households in each subdivision, a stratified random sample of two percent of the approximately 18,000 households was drawn.

A sixty-six item questionnaire was structured for telephone surveying. The survey instrument was developed and interviewers were trained using the Polling Attitudes on Community Education (PACE) training manual developed by Phi Delta Kappa, which commissions the annual Gallup Poll surveys on education.[1]

Within a two week period, 257 interviews were completed with all sections of the city/county being represented. With this type of sampling, the opinions of the respondents could be generalized to reflect the opinions of all households within the surveyed area. The survey resulted in securing the public's attitudes on items which covered numerous aspects of the schools.

Public Attitudes

The 257 adults surveyed had overly positive attitudes toward the schools in the city and county systems. More than two-thirds felt that students were getting a better education than they had received. Grades given the local schools by the survey respondents were as follows: A, 14 percent; B, 45 percent; C, 27 percent; D, 2 percent; F, 1 percent; and no opinion, 11 percent.

Grades were also given to school personnel and parents (for the way they were raising their children). The results of the grading, in the order of those receiving the most favorable grades, were as follows: principals, teachers, superintendents, school boards, and parents.

In response to teachers' salaries, 49 percent felt they were just right, 39 percent too low, 10 percent too high, and 2 percent had no opinion. Asked if they would pay higher taxes to improve education in the local schools,

48 percent said yes, 44 percent said no, and 8 percent had no opinion. County residents were more favorable toward higher taxes for schools, 52 percent, than city residents, 41 percent.

If cutbacks in the schools' budgets must occur, the survey respondents would most likely reduce the number of administrators. Overwhelmingly, the people expressed a desire to protect special services such as speech, reading and hearing therapy from cutbacks. With the current emphasis on basic academic subjects, the public was still highly in favor of requiring courses on drug and alcohol abuse prevention, computer training, driver education, and sex education for high school students.

Student activities were critically assessed. Eighty-eight percent of those surveyed felt that students with failing grades should not be allowed to participate in extra-curricular programs. Student involvement in fund raising was viewed as undesirable for elementary students by the majority, 64 percent, of the survey respondents.

These opinions and many others collected through the survey reflected a supportive citizenry for strong educational programs. In addition to the collective attitudes, information was obtained on the respondents' age, sex, educational level, occupation, and voter status. A simple analysis of the data provided an understanding of how different subgroups within the community felt about educational issues.

Non-parents, those having no children currently attending school in grades K - 12, were more likely than parents to give lower grades to parents in raising their children and also felt that discipline was not strict enough in the schools. Non-parents were more responsive to cutting school personnel to reduce costs and less responsive to raising their taxes for

education. More non-parents than parents felt that teacher salaries were too low.

Several questions were directed specifically to parents. For example, eighty-six percent of the parents surveyed responded positively when asked if they would be in favor of attending one evening class a month to find out what they could do at home to improve their child's behavior and increase their interest in school work.

Individuals with less than twelve years of education were more likely to feel that teachers' salaries were too high, were less willing to have their taxes raised for education, were less willing to serve on a school advisory board, and were less likely to have attended any recent meetings in the schools.

Age was not always a predictor of attitudes. However, on the issue of funding the younger and older age groups, who are most likely to not have children in school, were less responsive to increasing their taxes for education.

The Task Force Report

In addition to the survey, the Task Force had the teachers complete a questionnaire and they visited the schools. Based upon this information, the Task Force developed a report card and recommendations to fulfill the directive of the State.

This "report card" was submitted to the two local school boards and superintendents for their consideration. The report was also released to the media. In addition to covering the story, the area newspaper printed the survey of public attitudes in its entirety.

REPORT CARD

Subject	City	County
Discipline	C	C
Community/Parental Involvement	C	C
Administration/Supervision	C	B
Physical Facilities	B	D
Academic Achievement/instruction	B-	C+
Adequate Funding	B	C

It was recommended:

1. that a comprehensive school improvement program, one which clearly delineates deficiencies which need to be corrected along with cost estimates for effecting these improvements, be put before the public at every opportunity;

2. that an aggressive program be initiated by each board to encourage parental involvement in their children's education and to instruct parents in ways they might tutor their children more effectively at home;

3. that restrictions on participation in extracurricular activities by students receiving failing grades be implemented (No pass--No play).

4. that a Citizen Advisory Committee be appointed by each board yearly (with care being taken not to allow any special interest group to dominate this committee) that would report to the board the opinions and concerns of the community at large and make recommendations to the board as needed;

5. that improvement in maintenance and upkeep be in all schools equally;

6. that the boards severly limit charity and fund raising sales by students in all elementary schools;

7. that the schools provide more funds for instructional materials and textbooks in each classroom; and

8. that the administration implement a program to reduce teachers' paperwork.

Implications for School Administrators

This project, assessing citizen attitudes toward local education, was other-directed. The impetus came from the Governor and was carried out by local citizens. Although the task forces were purposely limited to the inclusion of professional educators, their services were required and instrumental in completing this task.

Several questions may be raised in response to the work of the Task Force: (1) should school boards and their administrators become more active in assessing public attitudes? (2) are public opinion polls an effective tool for gathering citizen input? (3) is it feasible for school administrators to conduct their own polls?

Public opinion polling has risen from the fiasco of the Truman-Dewey election, when the pollsters called it wrong, to become an integral part of today's decision making. From the Nielsen TV ratings to exit polls at the ballot box, the American society has become accustomed to this method of "feeling the pulse" of the people. The utilization of public opinion polling by local school administrators is valid.

Reasons for responding to the public are self-evident: (a) the public schools are tax supported; (b) the schools are educating the public's children; and (c) schools are structured to be governed by the people through elected school boards. Compliance with programs dependent upon funding from

sources outside the local area generally require public or more specifically parental involvement. Federal entitlement programs require public participation and many state programs have also included this regulation.

What effect does an informed and involved citizenry have on school performance? Research on effective schools repeatedly points to local leadership drawing upon the resources of the community as crucial.[2] School administrators have often failed to see the schools as an integral part of the community whose responsibility should be shared.

Public opinion whould not create a 'knee-jerk' reaction wherein policy is determined by the latest poll. However, an effective tool can be utilized to respond to the public's needs and interests. In educational jargon, polling could be considered as a pre-test to determine the areas of concern within the school's community. Once attitudes have been assessed, plans and programs can be established which reflect the local needs.

Both human and technical resources exist within most school systems to enable them to conduct public opinion polls. The education of school administrators at the graduate level is now a requirement, thereby exposing them to research techniques. Graduate schools could easily expand this knowledge.

Survey data can be quickly and inexpensively analyzed using computers available in the classrooms and administrative offices of the schools. The use of scientific sampling procedures limits the number of respondents necessary to accurately reflect the community's attitudes. Mail surveys can become a clerical assignment and trained volunteers can be used in telephone and personal interviews. Although extra effort and funding would be necessary to conduct polls, a well designed plan could make it cost effective.

The utilization of public opinion polling is not a new concept for school systems. However, it generally has been used to assess public responsiveness to school bonds and levies. Expanding the role of polling to involve the citizens more directly in educational decision making can result in a true community school concept.

The project reported in this paper grew out of the educational reform movement in Tennessee which placed emphasis on the increased involvement of local citizens in the schools. The reform was more accurately a renewal; a restoration to a former condition. Over the past several decades larger population areas and consolidated schools have removed the familiar and nostalgic remembrance of the school as a central part of the community. With the use of modern methods and technology, such as scientific sampling and public opinion polling, school administrators can effectively restore communications with the community.

1. Wilmer Bugher, PACE Polling Attitudes of Community on Education (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1980).

2. Glen E. Robinson, "Effective Schools Research, A Guide to School Improvement," ERS Concerns in Education, Educational Research Service, 1985.